

Galena, Ill., offers a lovely sense of home and a deep peace

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Scratch Brittany, scratch the Cotswolds: The prettiest place I've ever been, anywhere in the world, is Galena, Ill. It's also the only place on the planet where I feel truly at home.

More than 40 years ago, I fell in love with Galena for its history and architecture, which in this old river town are practically the same thing. Ulysses S. Grant, for example, lived here twice — in a small house before the Civil War and a grander one when he came home from winning it.

Both Grant houses still stand. So does nearly all of Galena's handsome 19th century heart, and I liked that sense of permanence.

It's a 600-mile round trip from where I live, but I began driving down often, daydreaming about fixing up an old house in Galena "someday." Then my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and "someday" turned into a broken-hearted "now."

On a bitterly cold day in March 1986, I followed a local Realtor into the 13 wrecks I could afford. Only one was warm — meaning I wouldn't have to replace its furnace — but everything else about that house was wrong.

I'd wanted what Galena is famous for: red brick, green shutters, lacy white porches and Civil War-era construction dates. This house looked too new, and it was ugly: plain wood frame with shabby gray siding like something you would find alongside railroad tracks. Its only porch was a concrete stoop with an old iron pipe for a railing. I said no before I even went in.

"But it was warm," I thought that night, shivering in my winter coat in a crummy motel.

Rehabbing it took nine years of weekends and a lot of my savings. But underneath its ugly surface was exactly what I needed: a sweet old farmhouse, circa 1869. With it came lilacs and apple trees, fireflies on summer evenings, the haunting moan of distant trains and peace so deep it still brings tears to my eyes.

My favorite spot, in all seasons, is its wide, white, lacy front porch. Never mind that the porch dates from 1992. It belongs in Galena now, and thanks to the house, so do I.

Info: <http://www.visitgalena.org>

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